

DRAUPADI: THE UNINVITED DAUGHTER

Aparna Bhatt

Guest Lecturer, Deshbandhu College, University of Delhi, India

Received: 10 May 2018

Accepted: 16 May 2018

Published: 31 May 2018

ABSTRACT

*This paper examines Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and employs close reading of the text to understand the author's unique portrayal of Draupadi, one of the most popular heroines of Indian mythology. Female subjectivity and its impact on the characterization of the protagonist is studied in detail. How the author renders Draupadi as every woman and how an uninvited daughter becomes the universal voice for the dreams, desires, longings, struggles, follies, vulnerabilities, heartaches, heartbreaks and resilience of women over the ages is the main focus of this paper.*

KEYWORDS: *Female Subjectivity, Draupadi, Female Experience, Female Consciousness, Mythology*

INTRODUCTION

Stories surround us, stories are around us, we consume stories, stories consume us, in fact, we are stories and stories are us. But, for a very long time, in this magnificent maze of stories, myths and legends, female subjectivity has been hushed, shunned and even strangled – grappling, gulping, gasping to breathe, to speak, to narrate its tales, female subjectivity, over the centuries, has only managed to survive in bits and pieces – a chapter here, a stanza there, very often mediated by a patronizing male voice. A woman's perspective, her individual experiences, her life as she lives and has lived and all that she sees, feels, encounters, understands and assimilates as the subject has been an important part of the struggle to find and reinforce woman's voice in literature. When a woman's thoughts, beliefs, desires, insights, her scuffle with identity politics and her struggles are voiced, they add a all- new and very often tricky and thorny meaning to even the age- old stories etched in our collective memory. As a result, simple tales are rendered problematic. The awakening of female consciousness has the humungous power to nourish, excite, inspire and even, at times, confuse, disorient and jar the sensibility of the consumers of these stories thus weakening and breaking the grasp of age-old tales where the man is the principal actor and the absolute. The male experience, that has been privileged since time immemorial, is no longer the sole pivot and this creates new dynamics and experiences. The female subject moves from the backdrop to the forefront, challenging, threatening, testing, taxing and even toppling several conventional ideas and structures in the process. From being an object to the subject, from being a counterpart to being apart, female subjectivity allows a woman to move from the shadowy periphery to the complex center as an individual.

Giving voice to the voiceless characters of women in mythology is an exciting attempt to rewrite the stories that have for long created and perpetuated patriarchal stereotypes. It is a brave attempt that provides a new vantage point to look at our culture and history. It enables us to visit old stories with fresh eyes. The woman subject can now voice, her opinions, express her impressions and reflections as an individual as the story unfolds around her. As Adrienne Rich states,

“Re-vision –the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction is for women more than a chapter in cultural history. It is an act of survival...We need to know the writing of the past and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition, but to break its hold over us” (Rich) Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is a successful example of Rich's argument. Rendering the story of Karuvas and Pandavas from the point of view of Draupadi is engaging as well as stimulating. Draupadi's character from Mahabharata, is a creation of memory and narrative. She exists in various texts but never before does she come alive as in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*.

The Palace of Illusions breathes fire, spews fiery arguments, rants fearlessly against a deeply and rocentric society steeped in patriarchal values and weaves strands of mythology, history, philosophy, logic and rhetoric into a vibrant literary fabric. As the veil of spatial and temporal distance is ripped apart, as the shroud of silence is shredded, Draupadi steps into the realm of female subjectivity. She is given a distinct voice, her words are laced with logic and reason, her questions are valid. She is no longer a mute, hazy figure relegated to the conventional background. Her questions jolt the facades of patriarchy. However, even though she gets a voice, the agency of choice and action cannot be granted to her. It remains an elusive dream for Draupadi (as it has remained for millions of women across thousands of years in cultures all across the world). Draupadi's actions are bounded. She is not a doer like the formidable Arjuna or the menacing Duryodhana. Her actions, like that of other female characters, are important only when they affect the men around her. But what remains interesting is that in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's literary landscape we get to experience Draupadi's mind at work – a strong, intelligent, thinking woman whose life is smothered by external and internal barriers but her words sure raise hell and using arguments, logic, and her mesmerizing charm she does exercise a certain level of influence in her husbands' lives.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni starts with Draupadi's impressions as a young woman—her fascination with the engaging story of her birth, her disappointment with the choice of her name that she finds “egoistic” and her desire for a “heroic name” that would befit a woman prophesied to “change the course of history,” her anxiety over being “shut up inside the mausoleum of a palace”ⁱ and her fear that history may never find her. As the story unfolds, Draupadi's passion for greatness and heroism, her yearning for a place in history is conveyed to us. Placed in a world driven by pride, ambition, revenge, power-struggles, sacrifices, intrigues and absolute ideas of right and wrong, a world where the sins of the father visit the children, where the unfulfilled ambitions of the elders are thrust upon the younger generation, where the paths of the mortals and the immortals intersect, it is against the backdrop of this world that Draupadi narrates the story of her life. And as she speaks, her story becomes more powerful, more compelling, more personal than ever before. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's Draupadi is not a simple figure from the distant past that is revered but not allowed to break the mold in which she has been cast. This Draupadi is very real, a layered, rounded, flesh and blood character with myriad emotions gushing through her veins.

The Palace of Illusions gives us a first-person account of all the major events in Draupadi's life. Draupadi's awkwardness in her father's palace, her aching, inexplicable desire for Karna, her marriage to the five brothers, her attachment to her lavish palace at Indraprastha, her questioning of the code of Dharma that the males around her live by, her disappointment over her eventual awareness that “there were things her husbands loved more” than her, the soreness of her heart when her husbands take other wives, her raw pain when she is dragged to the “sabha” from her apartments, her burning shame when “a hundred male eyes” gaze at her, the disquieting truth that dawns on her that a

woman is, after all, her husband's property, a mere object to be brazenly traded, bartered or gambled, the disrobing episode that first tosses her into the abyss of helplessness and then turns her shame and tears to seething anger and makes her boldly assert that "let them stare at my nakedness. Why should I care? They and not I should be ashamed of shattering the bounds of decency," her formal and strained relationship with her children, her troubled relationship with her mother-in-law Kunti, the healing solace she finds in Krishna's words and presence, the agonizing realisation that she too was "tainted with" vengeance and as Draupadi breathes her last, "left alone to die on a frozen hill," her musings over the life she has led and the pitiful awareness that she has "gained glory, respect and fear, even admiration," but missed out on love. "But where was the love I'd always longed for? Where was the person who'd accept me completely and cherish me with all my faults?" she asks herself during the solitary last moments of her life. (Divakaruni) And in the end, as her body disintegrates and her thoughts are worn away, Draupadi unites with Karna. This being the pinnacle of her subjectivity as "the chain that was tied to the woman -shape" collapses forever.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni makes Draupadi narrate her story, she deftly uses the strengths and weaknesses of Draupadi's character. We are taken on an inward and onward journey, both the within and without of Draupadi's world is brought to us. Narrating her tale is important for any woman (but how often do women get a chance of speaking in their own unmediated voice). Her words may not spell out absolute truths, but what we get is a peak into a woman's inner world – impressions, emotions, sensations, perceptions, reflections.

In *The Palace of Illusions*, Draupadi is a woman with a voice. The mantle of several roles falls on her – daughter, sister, wife, friend, mother, daughter-in-law. These roles are woven intricately with Draupadi the individual who thinks, dreams and desires, who has a rich inner life beyond the traditional roles she plays. She tells her own story in her own words but the principal actors still are the men whose world she inhabits. However, eloquence and subjectivity is in itself extremely gripping and invigorating in a remote epic character like Draupadi who has long been projected as a one-dimensional figure, a supplement, an appendix, a postscript that is often left unread.

CONCLUSIONS

Draupadi, the uninvited daughter, is bestowed with subjectivity and is presented more than just a legendary queen surrounded by exhilarating, devastating, scalding events. Draupadi here becomes every woman. She becomes a universal voice for the dreams, desires, longings, struggles, follies, vulnerabilities, heartaches, heartbreaks and resilience of women over the ages. As Dr. Vanamala Bhawalkar writes of Draupadi, "The superb qualities of Draupadi like steadfast devotion to duty, spirit of self sacrifice, fortitude, courage, capacity for hard work, presence of mind, perseverance, endurance, thirst for knowledge, wisdom to discriminate between right and wrong, strength to fight against injustice, truth, modesty, forgiveness, softness and harshness as the occasion demanded- these and such other qualities are seen in Draupadi's life are universal and beyond the limit of time and space." (Bhawalkar)

REFERENCES

1. Bhawalkar, Dr. Vanamala. *Eminent Women in the Mahabharata*. Delhi: Sharada Prakashan, 2002. Hardcover Book.
2. Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. *The Palace of Illusions*. New York: The Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group, 2008. Hardcover Book.

3. Rich, Adrienne. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*. 1971. Electronic. <https://people.emich.edu/cgallaghe1/Rich_When_We_Dead_Awaken.pdf>.
-